NASA's Four Corners Methane Study a Good First Step, But Limited

DURANGO, Colo. – Trade associations representing the upstream oil and natural gas industry responded to a study released today on methane emissions in the Four Corners region by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The groups called the study a good first step but narrow in scope compared to other pending studies that are expected to provide more comprehensive analysis. The groups are the La Plata County Energy Council, New Mexico Oil & Gas Association, Western Energy Alliance, Colorado Oil & Gas Association and Colorado Petroleum Council.

NASA initiated its study after satellite images captured from 2003-2009 visually depicted the region with methane levels about 50 parts per billion (ppb), or 3 percent, above common background levels of approximately 1,800 ppb. NASA's study estimated methane levels from sites in New Mexico and Colorado from April 17-24, 2015, finding detectable levels at approximately 250 locations. The measurements represent a snapshot in time, focused only on oil and natural gas sites and not other known human and natural methane sources in the area.

Several other studies are underway that will include on-the-ground measurements of all sources of methane in the Four Corners area, including coal mines, landfills and natural seeps. Those studies are being conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the University of Colorado and the University of Michigan in conjunction with NASA.

"The study represents a snapshot in time that can provide valuable information, but is not suitable for extrapolation to monthly, annual or other longer-term emissions estimates," said **Christi Zeller, executive director of the La Plata County Energy Council**. "Certain operational events, such as scheduled maintenance downtime, are temporary and can skew results. For example, one gas plant was measured five times, with one outlier measurement that occurred during a scheduled maintenance event. We look forward to the results from NOAA and the universities to provide a more complete picture of methane in the area."

"The first of several studies, NASA's assessment begins the process of better understanding methane levels in the region, but it addressed a limited set of methane sources," said **Steve Henke, president of the New Mexico Oil & Gas Association**. "It has been known by the states and tribes in the Four Corners that natural methane seeps occur throughout the area from the Fruitland Formation outcrop. Also, the topography of the area traps air and causes methane to build up over time, whether from human or natural sources."

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"There is a built-in economic incentive for producers to minimize emissions and capture as much methane as possible, since it's the very product they sell," pointed out **Kathleen Sgamma, vice president of government and public affairs for Western Energy Alliance**. "Natural gas producers have reduced emissions 15 percent since 1990 even as production has increased 54 percent. Natural gas is the primary reason the United States has reduced greenhouse gas emissions more than any other country. Methane is a naturally occurring element in the air we breathe, and does not represent a direct health risk in the Four Corners region. The small amounts emitted at the wellsite are offset many times over by the huge greenhouse gas reductions natural gas delivers when used for electricity generation."

"Oil and gas operators in Colorado strive to protect the health and safety of our communities and environment every day; after all, these are the communities where we are raising our families," said **Dan Haley, President and CEO of the Colorado Oil & Gas Association**. "Colorado and the nation have seen a significant decrease in greenhouse gas emissions due to an increase in the electricity powered by natural gas. The conversions to natural gas fired generation have allowed the United States to achieve the lowest CO_2 emissions since 1993 and Colorado will continue to be a leader in the decrease of overall emissions."

"Thanks to vast shale energy reserves and safe, modern hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling, the United States has become the world's leading producer of oil and natural gas," said **Tracee Bentley, executive director of the Colorado Petroleum Council**. "The Energy Information Administration (EIA) projects that carbon emissions will be lower in 2040, largely thanks to more electricity generation fueled by natural gas. Put simply, increased use of natural gas has been at the heart of America's climate progress and will continue to play a major role in emissions reductions well into the future."

Oil and natural gas production has taken place in the Four Corners' San Juan Basin since the 1940s. In the northwestern New Mexico portion, there are nearly 20,000 active natural gas wells and just under 2,000 oil wells. About 140 operators produced 646 billion cubic feet (Bcf) of natural gas in 2015. In the southwestern Colorado portion, there are approximately 3,400 active wells, about two-thirds of which are coalbed methane (CBM) and one-third conventional natural gas wells. About 34 operators produced 337 Bcf of natural gas in 2015. These operations support jobs and businesses, while providing local, state and federal taxes that fund schools, roads, public safety, conservation, and other vital services.

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The Energy Council is a non-profit trade organization that promotes safe and responsible natural gas development in La Plata County. Our 42 individual and company members work to build community relations, increase public understanding, and address public issues relative to the industry.

The New Mexico Oil & Gas Association is dedicated to promoting the safe and responsible development of oil and gas resources in New Mexico through advocacy, collaboration and education. Learn more at NMOGA.org

Western Energy Alliance represents over 300 companies engaged in all aspects of environmentally responsible exploration and production of oil and natural gas in the West. Alliance members are independents, the majority of which are small businesses with an average of fifteen employees. Learn more at www.WesternEnergyAlliance.org.

Founded in 1984, the Colorado Oil & Gas Association's (COGA) mission is to foster and promote the beneficial, efficient, responsible and environmentally sound development, production and use of Colorado oil and natural gas. COGA is a nationally recognized trade association that aggressively promotes the expansion of Rocky Mountain natural gas markets, supply, and transportation infrastructure through its growing and diverse membership.

The Colorado Petroleum Council is a division of API, which represents all segments of America's oil and natural gas industry. Its more than 650 members produce, process, and distribute most of the nation's energy. The industry also supports 9.8 million U.S. jobs and 8 percent of the U.S. economy.

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